

Future of Transport: rural strategy – submission from the ACRE Network

Introduction

The ACRE Network covers all of England through its 38-member charities. Our focus is on the wellbeing of all people living in all rural areas of England, especially those who are at risk of isolation and disadvantage and for whom rurality brings an additional challenge and cost to their daily lives. In the context of transport and mobility services we believe that nobody should be unreasonably disadvantaged in their access to public services by the rural location in which they live.

Although it is not clearly stated in the call for evidence, stakeholders have been informed that the scope of the Rural Strategy is intended to include freight and goods transport as well as personal mobility. As this seems to widen the call for evidence well beyond the specifics mentioned, we are taking this to be an intent towards a holistic mobility / transport / connectivity strategy and will respond with evidence accordingly.

It seems that DoT also see this strategy as becoming effective soon after 2021, not at some distance in the future. The call for evidence does not touch on a number of current public transport policies that are having a major impact on rural areas. These include the concessionary fares scheme, home to school transport, local government subsidy for non-commercial bus routes, goods transport aspects of carbon net-zero in relation to agricultural products, carbon footprint of goods transport to rural (and urban areas) and procurement / support for community transport. In providing evidence we have made the assumption that DoT intends that the new Strategy will deal with these ongoing transport policy issues and we are providing evidence on them accordingly.

1. Issues facing rural areas

Questions posed in the consultation:

- Do you have any evidence of the issues mentioned?
- Do you think there are other issues facing rural areas that we should consider in the strategy?

ACRE Evidence

The call for evidence appears to be based on a starting premise that the only challenges/opportunities facing rural people are those arising from technological innovation and the need for transport to make a substantial contribution to achieving carbon net-zero.

These are indeed important challenges/opportunities, and they must be addressed over the next 10 to 20 years. They are, however, only part of the picture.

Rural people currently face immediate and medium-term challenges that arise from the absence of any clear, national, policy in relation to rural transport and access. This strategy must address immediate issues as well as the long-term ones. It must do so from a position of public policy objectives towards rural people, not just out of a pragmatic will to embrace the latest cutting-edge technologies.

The central issue facing rural areas and rural people, in the short-, medium-, and long-term, is one of **equity and fairness** in gaining access to public and commercial services. A future strategy for transport serving rural people requires four high level policy commitments by current and future Governments; commitments that cut across all home departments and local government. Future rural transport strategy, in all its forms, is an essential, but not exclusive, part of these commitments:

1. The Government must commit to ensuring that nobody living in a rural area will be **unreasonably disadvantaged** in gaining access to public services that are provided, as of right, to all citizens of the UK eg. health services, education, justice, youth services, benefits etc..
2. A national rural transport strategy must be closely integrated with the active **rural proofing** of all universally available and provided public services. Failure to achieve this will allow the providers of these services to centralise delivery and pass the cost of ensuring access to their service on to either rural people, or to whatever budgets are available to support public transport.
3. The contribution of transport and mobility to achieving net-zero, must be addressed 'in the round' with other, linked, issues. The **carbon budget** for the whole community must take account of the carbon contribution of personal mobility as well as the contribution or savings that can be achieved by other societal changes that can have an impact on the requirement for personal mobility. Eg. measuring the carbon contribution of personal mobility whilst forcing an increase travel dependency by closing local services or by failing to measure the carbon reductions achieved by short local, rural, supply chains.
4. In order to put practical effect to these first three commitments, Treasury guidance to departments in costing services must require that **the cost of gaining access to all services**, whether in an urban area or a very rural one, is included in the presumed unit cost of delivery. This will create a financial incentive for provider organisations to find the most convenient and cost-effective way of delivering services and avoid centralisation that only saves money for the provider, whilst passing opportunity cost on to rural users.

2. Developments in innovation in rural transport

Questions:

- What examples do you have of the transport trends in rural areas (above)?
- Do you think there are other trends in innovation we haven't included?

ACRE Evidence

The call for evidence lists many technological innovations, and no doubt there is considerable knowledge and enthusiasm for this aspect of the strategy. However, the

section on community identity is a limited, transactional, and ‘thin’ perspective. Many rural communities have lost their local public transport at the same time as they have seen many services, both commercial and public, become increasingly centralised. Communities have innovated not through the technology they have used to respond to this, but in the means by which they have done so. New **social enterprise approaches** that blend voluntary effort with a business-like modus operandi have become common place. Equally, good neighbour schemes frequently provide extensive help for those whose mobility is restricted to get to essential services. Business model innovation has often been led by community transport operators (if local authority contracting permits) where a wide variety of types and styles of service have been blended in order to make the totality viable.

However, ultimately, all this effort can be fragmented and hard to sustain if public policy either ignores it, faces in a different direction or imposes a style of **procurement** that does not recognise the value that community commitment adds to what the public purse can buy.

The development of a rural transport strategy requires a full commitment to working with communities based on the principles of helping to achieve equity of access. The technological innovations listed in the call for evidence are all very exciting, but if they are not harnessed to proper **public policy objectives** that have equity of access for rural people at their heart – and the fair use of the public purse to achieve this – they are meaningless.

Although only partly a ‘transport innovation’, one area of rapid technological change is in medical technology. The line between those interventions that can be carried out in an ambulance by a trained paramedic and those that must wait until a patient has arrived at hospital are changing all the time. Since both **emergency and non-emergency transport to medical facilities** is a substantial issue for rural areas, and integration between public transport and medical transport a traditionally difficult one, this is an area of innovation that should inform the strategy.

3. Future of Transport principles

Questions

- Do you think the Future of Transport: rural strategy should include the above principles?
- Which additional principles would you like to see in the strategy?

ACRE Evidence

The call for evidence lists DoT’s assessment of ‘urban principles’ for future mobility. It is not entirely clear why the starting point has been ‘urban principles’, as opposed to just ‘principles’. Defining principles for a future transport strategy without this urban bias might have helped achieve a more holistic, national, strategy rather than one for the cities with rural areas appearing to be dealt with as an afterthought. Our suggestions for national underpinning principles – such as enabling equity of access to public services – are set out in answer to Question 1. Of the ‘urban principles’ listed:

‘Urban principles’	Rural community perspective
1. New modes of transport and new mobility services must	Safety must, of course, be paramount and must include: safety of users, safety of pedestrians, safe maintenance of permanent infrastructure, safety of livestock, safety

<p>be safe and secure by design</p>	<p>from monopolistic provision and financial exploitation, adequately accessible mobility to assure timely access to essential health and public services and monitoring from other harms that might occur due to inadequate mobility.</p>
<p>2. The benefits of innovation in mobility must be available to all parts of the UK and all segments of society.</p>	<p>Yes, this principle will require active 'rural proofing'</p>
<p>3. Walking, cycling and active travel must remain the best options for short urban journeys</p>	<p>Within reason this could also be applied to some rural areas, but will require close and active integration with 'rural proofing' (see comments in relation to Question 1) in order to ensure that both public and commercial services are provided in a way that makes extended travel less necessary.</p>
<p>4. Mass transit must remain fundamental to an efficient transport system</p>	<p>The term 'mass transit' may need to be 'interpreted' in the rural context before it is clear whether this is a realistic aspiration for rural mobility. Is the term being used as generic transport planners' term for 'buses and trains'? If the Department is keen to produce two parallel strategies, urban and rural, it may need to arrive at a lexicon that does not cause misunderstandings.</p>
<p>5. New mobility services must lead the transition to zero emissions</p>	<p>The principle is right, however, whether, in the rural context, it is possible to see 'mobility services' <u>leading</u> the transition is more difficult. Growing use of the term "mobility as a service" (MAAS) makes it hard to interpret whether 'mobility services' in rural areas could achieve this aspiration. Other sources and drivers of carbon emissions may be more important in rural areas and will lead the transition. Urban areas consume both substantial amounts of energy that emit CO2 and also the product of economic activity that generates carbon emissions in rural areas, therefore reductions in rural areas will require a holistic approach between both urban and rural areas. A "just transition" will also be required in rural areas, mainly by avoiding any temptation to use pricing of carbon emissions. Rural economic and community activity has grown up over many years in a way that has made it dependent on fossil fuels and a 'just transition' demands that economic carrots, not sticks, should be used to drive change.</p>
<p>6. Mobility innovation must help to reduce congestion through more efficient use of limited road space – for example, through</p>	<p>There is some relevance here, depending on wider macro developments in national, regional and local economies. Again, strategies for urban areas will only be effective if they are designed in a holistic way with surrounding rural areas. Initiatives such as the French infrastructure for Covoiturage could assist in this area.</p>

<p>sharing rides, increasing occupancy or consolidating freight</p>	
<p>7. The marketplace for mobility must be open to stimulate innovation and give the best deal to consumers</p>	<p>Dependence on market mechanisms should be approached with caution. In general terms rural areas have less scope for economies of scale and, as a result, tend to be deserted by commercial interests other than those operating on the narrowest of profit margins. These are, of necessity, seldom commercial interests that can invest in high levels of innovation without support from the public purse. The absence of 5G in rural areas, and data availability that will rely on it, will also reduce the scope for cutting edge innovation in the area of mobility services. Hybrid approaches may be needed for rural areas that will blend traditional and innovative mobility solutions – hybrid in terms not only of technology but also business model and pure reliance on the market.</p>
<p>8. New mobility services must be designed to operate as part of an integrated transport system combining public, private and multiple modes for transport users</p>	<p>Again, this is a hard principle to unpick when the assumptions underlying the use of the term 'new mobility services' are not clear in a rural context. There seems to be an urban oriented understanding of personal mobility that is hidden within this principle.</p> <p>One of the areas of integration not mentioned in the 'urban principles' but essential in rural areas is that of fully engagement between mainstream public transport and non-emergency hospital transport. If this can be achieved with more success than has been managed to date, it will unlock more effective use of available public resources.</p>
<p>9. Data from new mobility services must be shared, where appropriate, to improve choice and the operation of the transport system</p>	<p>The principle is clear but applying it in rural areas may need some caution. Anonymised data about large scale people and freight movements in urban areas presents few conflicts over personal information. In rural areas the smaller number of people means that data can sometimes not be treated as anonymous and this difference will need to be built into any data sharing strategy to support innovations in mobility.</p>

4. Encouraging transport innovation in rural areas

Questions

- Are there specific considerations for testing and trialling new technologies in rural areas that you think we should consider?
- In your view, what should the role of central government, sub-national transport bodies, local authorities be in encouraging innovation in rural areas?
- Do you think government can encourage the private sector to develop innovative new transport services in rural areas?
- How do you think government should encourage the private sector?
- Do you have any other comments on this call for evidence?

ACRE Evidence

It is as essential for this transport strategy that all rural areas have **Gigabit capable broadband**. This must be in a form that is accessible and affordable for all, just as it is for all other Government strategies.

It is as essential for this transport strategy that all rural areas have access to 4G, and then to **5G**, in a way that is accessible and affordable for all, as it is for all other Government strategies.

Rural areas are tending to be on the fringes of multiple '**sub-national transport strategy areas**'. It is important that central Government is clear about what is expected of these new strategies and the bodies that are responsible for them. It is especially important that people representing all aspects of rural community life are actively engaged in the development of sub-national transport strategies. If this does not happen it is likely that urban transport patterns / technological solutions will dominate, and the rural communities will become increasingly marginalised in public transport solutions and risk being treated as 'unsustainable'.

Government needs to be clear about the objectives of its transport strategy for rural areas; we urge it to place **equity of access and equity of opportunity** for everyone, irrespective of where they live, at the heart of this. Having done so, it needs then to look closely at all current investment in supporting people's mobility: investment in transport infrastructure, subsidised fares, home to school transport, fuel rebates, incentives to transition to low carbon emission modes etc.. and ensure that these are contributing to this objective for rural people.

Government must integrate its transport strategy for rural areas with its '**vision for rural areas**' (as articulated by DEFRA) and a thorough approach to rural proofing across all of Whitehall and local government. Provision of transport to public services where the service planners have been allowed to centralise locations of provision at will, and pass the opportunity cost on to others, is unacceptable.

In the first instance Government must think about the people who live in rural areas and their need for mobility; **services for visitors** can help to make mobility more viable, but they should not be the starting point for policy.

It might be a helpful innovation in the development of Government policy towards both transport strategy and rural areas if a **cross-cutting public value outcome** were defined to cover this area. Such an outcome might be framed around finding ways of ensuring

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equity of access to essential services for rural communities. It could be led by either DEFRA or DfT and would bind DfT, MHCLG, DfE, DWP and DHSC to this objective. Such an approach would need the wholehearted 'buy-in' of the Treasury.

Ends

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